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The Chastetree

Jane. Strolling the tanbark path down into the nature center, half wondering why she had ended up there for her "solo"--and a day tardy because of Dr Kasman's muddled assignment list. At any rate, she was expected to fetch something foggily symbolic of herself for his "Seminar In Personal Rediscovery": a leaf? she thought, a twig? dogshit?

Just before a campus policeman began running towards her, she'd been musing that nothing connected in that class--oh, to be sure, on purpose, as Dr Kasman had assailed them: "Clusters of intuitions and images, or sounds, memories. Whatever. Odors even! Let's accept such clusters without generalizing about them, or without narrowing them to the meaning, and, therefore, to the preconceptions, ah, inherent in

everything."

Uh huh. Odors all right. Is that name Kasman or Gas-man? She very nearly said this last aloud. It made no difference because the officer had vanished, "probably steered offcourse by a case of Bud Light empties in the Japonica," she laughingly pronounced.

Patrolman Ridgeway, though, promptly craned from behind an oak, thrusting down a photocopied ***ALERT***! describing a Blond Caucasian of yesterday who had stepped from Crum Creek, naked, to invite some dawdling coed to "experience a dip with me." Ridgeway snatched back the sheet and shook it at Jane in the green light. "Never walk in here alone. Never! No time is safe."

"If women can't walk anywhere alone they might as well be men," she informed the quizzical Officer Ridgeway. "Take a dip huh? How was his dip stick?" she muttered. "Let's get a look at yours--you never know." Jane.

"Ma'm?" the tall officer questioned, the oak looming behind him.

"Oh nothing," she smiled. "I prefer not to narrow myself to meaning...a la Dr Gasman...in case I thereby find out what's wrong with me and the entire sick country. As to you and me, I'll just take our bizarre rendezvous with its surrounding

odors, birdsongs, and bawdy titillation back to the strange doctor's class--or is bawdy titillation redundant, officer? Was Bawdy Titillation covered in the Police Academy? Under Lascivious Behaviours, General? And where does it fit in the scheme or non-scheme of existence anyway? Is it...is it slime or paradigm?"

Ridgeway grimaced wryly, being used to fresh students all right...but this little muttering one now wheeling around among the dapples...? The worst yet. He blinked as she disturbed the light.

Double-checking survey results with her that last evening in his messy office, Dr Kasman had spoken of the pleasure of her company in a voice that hardly moved the air, that air where other of his hints had breathed softly and died, like decaying notes on a flood-damaged piano--actually breathed so softly and died so quickly that she couldn't be absolutely certain she heard anything at all. She was so shortly out of the convent that she wasn't sure that she could recognize, let alone encourage, masculine attention.

But there really is no one else, small voice or large, she concluded when reaching an enclosed space called the Garden of Fragrances. Oh they'll arrest the erect Caucausian so he'll not proposition me. She sang this last in a Gilbert and Sullivan

style, adding "oh no he'll not, no no he'll not. And there's the--I say there's the--there's the pity!" Jane.

She kicked up the lid of a small box holding brochures describing the garden, plucked one out.

Sitting on a bench she read the list of plants, skipping the introduction while saying "What does anyone mean among these damn academics anyway? The ambivilancies come in thickets!" Sweet allyssum she misread as sweet asylum, immediately catching her error--and then aching within the ripe aromas, too suddenly, for the convent.

Oh well, I'll pray about it...all the confusion now. But I'll never go back: obliged to leave that clarity and simplicity, or cease breathing--no matter about my prayers.

But, no, no, she wouldn't pray now, about that or anything--so turned off for the present, and onto nothing else, certainly not academic obscurity, and hints and whispers a la Dr Kasman.

That pussy! God how pukingly sexist that word is! A cowardly man is a woman's vulva. Oh, Linguists would of course pussyfoot by saying the slang takes from pussycat also. At any rate I'm sick to death of my pussy and its supposed needs. Stop saying pussy, you pussy! Give me a break! Everybody!

I could, though, urgently love Officer Ridgeway for his straight-ahead style--all nuance a stranger to him. "Like women with the rag on," he might say in response to the slightest deviation from Victorian female behavior. Half the universe with the rag on--now there's a thought. "Chastetree" she read aloud from the brochure.

"I do prefer the vulgar somewhat..." here she used the weeping silver linden to stand in for Dr Kasman..."it being blunt where you are mincing. If you could say something, well then I trust myself to spontaneously and honestly answer. One can say, for instance, coffee? movie? dinner? destroy a bed? One can say anything! That's the beauty of saying. So say! All tiny talk is impotence, all half-wisecracks impotence--of both sexes, much as I'm in a men-blasting mood.

So, too, is my watery little bawdiness. Why the very air itself expects more of us. God--if there is one--does!

But so, she sighed, had her former religious life been impotent. What she thought humility, simple timidity: afraid. Afraid to live either in or out of the convent. And fooling no one who knew her and could easily spot her gradual coming-apart. Oh why do we all of us choose to spoil our lives in such a way? Quiet desperation, Thoreau said. Or do we choose?

"Better an open rebuke than a secret love." Isn't that in Psalms somewhere, Dr Kasman? Or are you so secularly tight-assholed an academic that you'd scorn the Bible too? Maybe the text isn't quite accurate enough for you yet, its provenance lost in Providence--at Brown University, heh heh.

All my dreary intellectual shit aside, I really might deal you an open rebuke, Dr Kasman. And I might not. What did one of those tough guys say in The Killers? 'It's something you never know at the time.' Is spontaneity a vain hope in all stifling atmospheres--convents and universities and infinities upon wretched infinities of moribund businesses in this overwhelming bore of a country?

What am I doing here on this bench? Oh the smells are truly truly wonderful, that's for sure! And what was I doing there in the woods? I don't even know, really. Why did I leave?

The woods or the convent? I thought I had reasons at the time. Faded. Forgotten. Mother Superior's firm sympathy then; Officer Ridgeway's ludicrous "Caucasian"-alarm now.

Jane decided that she'd have to return to the nature center, parry this latest cowardice at least.

Once again on the tanbark trail all is very silent, nearly as sealed as the convent, just the sporadic twitter of birds and

the rustle of brush playing under it, but soon the officer shadows Jane on the ridge above, resembling a spavined dog against the smudges on the sky. He hears, or sniffs, something, and instantly straightens up. A wave of rain whips through and is gone.

Jane improvises, giggling: Now rigid on the ridge is he/ erect to possibility./I say!/Ridgeway!/Bring it down here for a poke/and I'll fuck you till your eyes smoke./ Insane!/ Signed, Jane.

A fragment in Kasman's office swims in against the present damp fertility, her telling him what he later designated as her vision! of the survey results: "One-third liked what they liked; one-third hated what they hated; one-third had little idea of anything."

"O pray, which third are you, Officer Ridgeway? My father, Sir, was a whole man! I loved him in his young photograph, his face the very sun itself! Now I just have that reticulated picture, that's all, no matter what the fuckin sentimentalists say! He's dead! Period! And love for me is stone cold dead! Why mince around the truth? Oh there'll be plenty of Dr Kasmans, some shy, some pukingly aggressive.

But nothing ever to touch me, to really enter."

Both have been moving, separately though absurdly: Jane

sliding on the fragrant grass and yelling, Officer Ridgeway Z-ing down the slope in response to her apparent alarm. Jane stops, her shoes tilted down into mud, but manages to extract, and then run away before the officer can catch her.

Back at the Garden of Fragrances she writes a letter to her father along the margins of the brochure with her left, or non-dominant hand, as Dr Kasman had, this one blessed time, specifically assigned. She interrupts this laborious task, intrigued for a moment with the names therein which she recites mantra-like. "California incense cedar juniper Himalayan sarcococca fragrant viburnum yellowwood saucer magnolia Japanese Snowbell sweetshrub burkwood daphne fothergilla roseshell azalea Virginia sweetspire reeves skinnia white Chinese wisteria allium snowdrops grape hyacinth Siberian squill sweetbay magnolia weeping silver linden glossy avelia butterflybush harlequin glory-bower summersweet clethra waxmrytle bee balm catmint silver edged thyme katsura calamintha.

"Chastetree chastetree chastetree chastetree chastetree," she ends, chanting and crying.

Then in some uncanny atmospheric sorcery, lighting-crossed blackness clamps over the courtyard and yet each flower and tree and bush leapingly glows. Jane, all but bursting from her skin in the electricity, manages to read what she had inscribed in

her little girl's printing, just before the brochure is mysteriously, and very gently, taken from her.

b thence to the Blond Caucasian, his smooth body dazzling, his long hair webbing her face. Instantly the words she had written come from out of her, "I'll swim with you Daddy."